Anatole France's Autobiographical Idyl

Anatole France has become the French Henry Adams. In Paris Calmann Levy has published "Petit Pierre," in which the great French novelist and ironist embodies his earliest recollections. The book tells the story of a little boy born in Paris in 1844, seeing the sights of 1844 and asking the questions of 1894, of 1904, of 1914—of all the long and wonderful years that Anatole France has lived through and written about.

Professor Michaud, who tells about M. France's "Petit Pierre," is professor of French literature at Smith College, French editor of Emerson's "Journals" and author of a suggestively original book, in French, on "Anglo-Saxon Mystics and Realists."

By REGIS MICHAUD.

ONCE upon a time, during the reign of Louis Philippe, King of France, a little boy was born on Quai Malaquais near Quai Voltaire in Paris. At that time there were hardly any railroads in France. That was the age of the 234 as against the 30,000 steam horse-power, according to Henry Adams, with no wireless, no radium, no airplanes, no monster gun or mustard gas.

At that time "people and things," if we believe Anatole France "were much nearer each other than to-day. A felicitous intimacy was the rule . . ." Then a little child was born with fairies around his cradle and washed in a kettle to make sweet preserves, "un chaudron de confiture," as truly as Plato was fed with honey by bees from Hymettus mountain.

Two hostile parties of fairies surrounded the little boy's cradle. Some of them carried in their hands a wand of ivory wreathed with roses. They were the fairies of sentiment and passion. The other fairies with set faces and a wand of ebony in their hands were the powers of logic and reason. The fairies with the ivory wand spoke to Petit Pierre as follows:

"Thine will be the spirit of the eighteenth century, of Voltaire and Watteau; thou wilt glide on the surface of life; thy path will be flooded with sunshine. Not an atom of the universal beauty will escape thee. Thy nimble spirit, like Ariel, will fly from flower to flower, up to the cornice of ancient temples, to pluck acanthus and laurel. In mouldy books thou wilt revive the soul of yore and the lore of most ancient times. The garden of Epicure will be thy kindergarten."

And then the fairies made an offering to the Three Graces.

The other dames also made a prediction:

"Thou comest too young in a world too old. Thine will be the mind of a twentieth century Heraclitus, to perceive at the same moment the value and utter néant and vanity of all things. Thou wilt lack faith when in need of belief. Thou wilt be a true representative of thine age, with eyes to lead astray the hand, with thought to betray the will. After a long journey through knowledge and life thou wilt still be left looking for a reason to choose, like a man unable to market his treasures."

Then the dark fairies departed leaving to the child a tiny image of the goddess Nemesis.

II.

Little Pierre has been true to the prediction. His life is the story of a child born in the twilight of romantic France, but who reflected upon his life in the dawn of the twentieth century. As in the case of Walter Pater [*The Child in the House*] or of Pierre Loti [*The Romance of a Child*], we see how impossibly old and sophisticated nineteenth or twentieth century dilettantism can make a child.

Here is a little fellow born in Paris under Louis Philippe, "King of France by the grace of God." He has seen M. de Chateaubriand and Béranger pass under his father's windows. In the "salon" of M. Nozière French ancien régime was still alive. People there had seen Marie Antoinette and Louis Seize, had watched the guillotine at work on the Place de la Révolution. Napoleon had paraded for them from his coronation to Waterloo.

Petit Pierre still revives for us, in 1919, those quaint portraits of seventy-five years ago, so much like the portraits drawn by Ingres, David or Honoré de Balzac in his *Human Comedy*. (See for instance Uncle Hyacinthe, "who had spent all his virtue in one day" and did not find enough of it left to live up to that heroic performance.) In fact, Anatole France brings very close to us those bygone days. The French have a striking way of expressing the dotage of senility. They call it "tomber en enfance." Reading *Petit Pierre*, one cannot help wondering at seeing Anatole France, that apostle of progress and preacher of the socialist gospel, taking refuge against modernity in the age of Louis Philippe and ready to give up his twentieth century knowledge for the simple instincts of a little child.

The miracle of rejuvenation might well be possible if the goddess Nemesis allowed. But this is not the case. Monks who enter the convent after a stormy life cannot compete for "naïveté" with white cowled and white souled novices. There is a limit of age for a disillusioned fakir to enter the jungle before he has tasted too much of the bitter-sweet of life. Terribly old is little Pierre. His "naïveté" does not deceive the present day reader. That child reasons in 1844 as if he had already written *Sylvestre Bonnard, Thaïs, The Epicurean Garden* and *The Isle of Penguins*.

Anatole France had already twice revived little Pierre, in *The Book of My Friend*, and in *Pierre Nozière*. As France gets older Petit Pierre seems to grow younger. He was 10 or 12 in *Pierre Nozière*. He has just been born in Paris in the new autobiography.

III.

That Petit Pierre, as Anatole France certifies, was born in a "chaudron de confiture," makes us smile, but hardly surprises us. Where else could he have taken his sugar coated epicureanism and that drop of honey at the tip of his pen? When A. France calls Petit Pierre "pessimistic and joyous," just like himself, we thank him for that definition which fits so well his future metamorphosis from *Sylvestre Bonnard* to *The Gods Are Thirsty*, through *The Opinions of Jérôme Coignard*.

Reading *Petit Pierre* makes us wish for a double life, one for experience, the other one for reflection. To be at the same time a living being and a philosopher has unfortunately been denied to us mortals by a jealous Providence. Why not then have first a childhood and adolescence to act, to love, to succeed or fail, then a second existence to draw the moral lesson of the former, and a third life to begin all over again? One part of our life for experience, another part for education—was not this the dream of that Petit Pierre of New England, our own Henry Adams? In the absence of anything better, Anatole France has solved the problem in giving to that little boy of seventy-five years ago his own modern soul and philosophy. France, in fact, hardly recognizes that little fellow who used to be himself. There is something pathetic in seeing that old "sage" trying to bring back to life that younger part of himself, the little boy who, he tells us, probably died a long time ago. He revives him, indeed, but makes him older than his age by giving him the philosophy of a cynic of 1919, and this is another element of pathos.

Henceforward little Pierre will not even be able to suck a piece of candy without weighing the significance of his act. Anatole France plays with Petit Pierre the part of Mephistopheles with Faust. One night, for instance, M. Nozière enters the room, and to lure the child to sleep, tells him that he will give him the most cunning little cow in the world. That is enough to make the child happy and set him a-dreaming. But it is not enough for France, who draws from the fact a theory of the universal illusion.

As every child, Petit Pierre was born an optimist, and even little mischievous Alphonsine Dusnel could have forced her hatpin into his leg without endangering his serenity once the crisis of tears was over. It took a twentieth century cynic to teach Petit Pierre on that occasion, as Anatole France does, the law of universal malignity. When Petit Pierre smelt the flavor of "angélique" in his mother's room and was lied to, or at least thought so, a single glance of his mother's eyes told him that mothers never lie, and Petit Pierre was glad to find something in his heart that could contradict his reason. That was enough for a child to learn. Why does the twentieth century cynic step in to tell the naïve child that, after all, the heart is not a safer guide than reason?

IV.

Thus Anatole France goes on pinning his twentieth century philosophy to every experience of little Pierre. The little child he used to be serves him only like Thaïs, Paphnuce, Jacques Tournebroche or Jérôme Coignard as a medium to express his views. There are in the book delightful epilogues, like the one where Petit Pierre enters a pastry shop and asks his mother a question which might well puzzle even economists: "Who is supposed to give money, he who sells or he who buys?" Another day Petit Pierre is learning his catechism. He has copied without a question mark the sentence: "Qu'est-ce que Dieu?" Petit Pierre was too little of a sceptic in those days, says his biographer. Since then Anatole France has used a great many question marks, too many maybe, as he confesses, and we are thankful for that confession.

Naïve Petit Pierre usually takes things at their face value, when his Mephistopheles is not behind him. Sometimes, however, he knows better. One day his mother gives him a drum. A child may well be happy for that and think that a drum is merely an instrument to make noise and play the soldier. But Pierre finds out, with tears in his eyes, that a drum may also be a mere device for a mother to quiet her little boy and keep him amused while she leaves the house unaware. Petit Pierre that day began loathing even his drum and he tore it into pieces. He had found the lesson of life for himself.

A representative French child is little Pierre His state of mind has been that of several generations of Frenchmen between 1844 and the present. Much water has passed under the bridges since then, however, and it is a sure instinct for safety which makes Anatole France bring back to the reign of Louis Philippe his scepticism now obsolete.

The wind does no longer blow to scepticism in fair France. France is now a country devoted to energy and action. If we must believe critics, French and foreign, Anatole France's philosophy has long ago ceased to be an ideal for his country.

The books of that arch denier are not, just now, the kind of bread Frenchmen want to feed upon. Petit Pierre as a philosopher is undoubtedly out of date. France has no use nowadays for a *Hamlet* in nankeen breeches.

V.

To solve the practical and critical problems of France, Petit Pierre and his Mephistopheles are certainly out of place. They know too much. But it must be possible, nevertheless, to find Anatole France's shortcomings as a philosopher, without being unjust to that wonderful artist.

Modern critics have reduced the moral history of France, in the last fifteen years, to the conflict between thought and action, intellect and sentiment, intellectualism versus spiritualism. M. Bergson and his followers, the theoricians of sentiment and instinct versus knowledge, will find abundant arguments in their favor, strange as it seems, in the new autobiography of that king of all intellectuals. "Of all the definitions of man," writes Anatole France, "the worst seems to me that which makes of man a rational being." "I call rational (raisonnable) him who does not pretend to be so." That would sound very little intellectual if it did not sound so sarcastic. For reason to despair of itself in the very midst of its greatest achievements was already part of the pose of the decadent school. *Petit Pierre* reads like a defence of instinct against intelligence.

Petit Pierre learns nothing at school. He relies for his knowledge on the popular wisdom of his maid Mélanie or the blind intuitions of his dog Mitzi. Here Anatole France's scepticism meets the mysticism of Maurice Barrès and Loti. The Bergsonians would have a right to count him as an adept were it not for the contradictions in the book.

Instinct or intelligence, the reason or the heart, who knows, after all, which guide to follow?

VI.

What, then, is the last word of wisdom for Anatole France? It is still in 1919 apparently what it was for his master, Renan, in the '90s. Anatole France is the last of the "esthetes," those "esthetes" of whom France had so many reasons to be proud but who could have cost her so dear.

The end of the quest for Anatole France is not on the line of facts and action, but on that of art. His is Walter Pater's ideal. Art and beauty are the only consolation left to us mortals. "Since I was 8," says Anatole France, "I felt that he is fortunate who, giving up all thinking and comprehension, loses himself in the contemplation of the beautiful."

At the end of his life, as at the beginning, Anatole France stands high up on a peak, somewhere on Mount Olympus, among the gods of Greece and the demigods of French classical literature, in the company of Voltaire, Renan, Racine, to the memory of whom he sings a dithyramb at the close of *Petit Pierre*. There, on those heights, France may be ready to hail him anew some day, when she has finished rebuilding her devastated homesteads, her cathedrals, her mines, her orchards.

No doubt Petit Pierre has chosen ill his time to be reborn among us in that ebb and tide of so many conflicting passions. Even a prodigious child like him resembles more to-day a fossil of another geological period. If Petit Pierre had been born after 1880 instead of in 1844 he might be now keeping watch on the Rhine if he had not fallen, one among so many, on "the field of honor." But, after all, did not Petit Pierre, not so very long ago, write *Sur la voie glorieuse*, that battle hymn sung to the allied soldiers by the author of *The Epicurean Garden*? What a recantation on the part of M. Bergeret!

There must be a planet near Sirius where the contradictions of Anatole France, alias Petit Pierre, alias Sylvestre Bonnard, alias Jérôme Coignard, may be reconciled by one of those kind divinities who endowed him at his cradle.

All the police reporters drifted into the station house Sunday night. "Anything doing, Lieutenant?" they asked eagerly. Did the Lieutenant tell them that Theodore Dreiser, a novelist, had that afternoon been struck by an automobile at Columbus Circle, run over and taken to Roosevelt Hospital? He did not, we infer. "Nothing at all, men," we imagine him saying. So they went away from there and nothing was printed. . . . Three stitches were taken in Dreiser's head. His right hand won't hold a pen for some time. He is badly bruised and at his home, 165 West Tenth street, there is still some question of possible internal hurts.

"Flsh" is not "flesh," but on the other hand, it isn't "fish." Readers who may have thought the lines in Amy Lowell's poem, printed in our number of April 27, to have asked, "is it catgut and horsehair, or fish sawing against the cold blue gates of the sky?" are duly warned that the word was "flsh" and should have been "flesh." Several have asked if the reference was to swordfish—*Swordfish and Poppy Seeds*, you know—but two wrongs do not make a right, hence this correction.